A Tuscan travel party amongst the Frisian natives
The day trip of prince Cosimo to Stavoren and Molkwerum, 26 June 1669

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A princely visit to Stavoren and Molkwerum

In the early morning of Wednesday 26 June 1669 a travel party of about forty people headed by the twenty five year old Tuscan prince Cosimo (1642-1723) boarded a yacht in Enkhuizen, a town in northern Holland. Propelled by a gentle breeze already a few hours later the vessel reached the eastern shores of the Zuiderzee at Stavoren in Friesland. In this little town the prince and his company had lunch. In the afternoon they visited the village of Molkwerum, a few miles to the east. The next day the party sailed back to Enkhuizen and continued its journey through the county of Holland. Prince Cosimo and his fellow travellers only spent a day and a night in Friesland. However brief the stay of the Italian party in Friesland was, their excursion was an exceptional event. In the seventeenth century, visitors hardly ever visited Friesland on purpose. At best, they stopped over in some of the Frisian towns on their journey from Amsterdam to Northern Germany or the other way round. This is hardly surprising given the fact that Lodovico Guicciardini in his famous Description of the Low Countries had only paid scant attention to Friesland. More in particular Guicciardini’s description of the antique ruins to be seen at Stavoren

1 wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their stimulating comments. I extend that gratitude to the editors of this volume, Emma Grootveld and Nina Lamal and to my dear colleagues at the Frysk Akademy, in particular Peter Duiff, Eric Hoekstra, Peter van der Meer, Hans Mol and Oebele Vries who all commented upon an earlier version of this article. Obviously all remaining errors are mine.


remained very vague. Although the first edition of Guicciardini’s account had been published already a century earlier, the book remained until the end of the seventeenth century one of the most influential travel guides for foreign visitors to the Low Countries and especially for Italians. Most likely Cosimo and his courtiers had read Guicciardini before they left for the Low Countries. Their brief visit to Friesland did not alter the standard image of Friesland. In 1683, Pietro Guerini, one of his agents who visited the Low Countries in his wake, travelled from Amsterdam to Hamburg via Friesland. According to him nothing particular was to be seen or learned there.

In this article I shall argue that although the Tuscans were fascinated by what they read, heard and saw in Friesland, their visit turned out to be somewhat disappointing. This excursion had been highly recommended to them by Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt (1625-1672). According to this mighty Dutch politician, in Molkwerum Cosimo could observe ‘the language and the habits of the old Frisians’. Subsequently he advised Cosimo to travel to Amsterdam via the Beemster, a then recently drained lake. The Tuscan prince conformed to the suggestions of his Dutch host. In effect, the straight canals, fertile right-angled meadows and impressive farm houses made a far bigger impression upon him than Friesland had done. In the official journal of the journey, the ride through the Beemster was recorded as ‘the most beautiful and delightful’ part of their trip in the United Provinces. In De Witt’s opinion and by consequence also Cosimo’s, the primitive nature of Molkwerum stood in contrast to the well-organized character of the Beemster. Molkwerum thus functioned for the Tuscan visitors as a prism that mirrored the marvels of the Dutch Republic.

In what follows I shall first describe how Cosimo’s excursion to Friesland fitted into his travel pattern. Subsequently, I shall analyse the descriptions courtiers made of his visit to Molkwerum and Stavoren. Their observations reflected to some extent stereotypes that were cultivated by the political and cultural elites in the Dutch Republic. This opens up questions on the origins of such received ideas and on their impact on the fashioning of regional identities. In fact the political and cultural

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8 Egli (= de Witt) consigliò l’A.S. (= Cosimo) a andare a Malquerum per la curiosità di veder preservati e l’antica lingua e i costumi degli antichi Frisoni. Cf. Hoogewerff (ed.), De twee reizen, cit., p. 248.
9 Ed a Beemster per vedere quel gran lago industriosamente dagli abitanti seccato e reso oggi fertilissimo. Cf. IvI, p. 248. The Beemster was the first of a series of lakes in the North of Holland that were drained in the first half of the seventeenth century. Up to these days the original, planned lay-out of the landscape has been preserved. For that reason in 1999 the Beemster has been listed on the UNESCO world heritage register. Cf. J. de Vries, The Dutch Rural Economy in the Golden Age, 1500-1700, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1974, pp. 160 and 194.
antagonism between Holland and Friesland dated back to the Middle Ages, when at several instances the counts of Holland had tried to conquer Friesland. Although from about the 1590s the Frisian economy had become ever more dependent upon the growth of Amsterdam, such tensions were revived in the seventeenth century.\(^\text{12}\) Nevertheless, within the framework of the United Provinces Friesland was considered to be the second-richest province after Holland. Therefore, it was perceived, not least by Johan de Witt, as the most important of the ‘lesser provinces’.\(^\text{13}\) Even though Cosimo was interested in administrative matters and he studied the institutional framework of the United Provinces, he might not have fully grasped these subtleties.\(^\text{14}\) However, the myth that in the towns such as Stavoren, Molkwerum and Hindeloopen, aspects of the primitive Frisian culture would have been preserved flourished well into the nineteenth century.\(^\text{15}\) Therefore that myth shall be briefly discussed in the last section of this article.

**Cosimo’s travel pattern**

Cosimo’s whistle-stop visit to Friesland was part of a greater tour that the prince and his entourage made through Western Europe. In September 1668 they had sailed the Mediterranean from Livorno to Barcelona. The following months, the prince and his courtiers visited the Iberian Peninsula, the British Isles, the Dutch Republic and the health resorts of Aix-la-Chapelle and Spa. Subsequently, after a spell of nearly two months in Paris, the party travelled south to Lyon. From there the travellers navigated down the Rhône River. In Marseille, they were awaited by grand ducal galleys, which brought the party back home. In October 1669, more than a year after Cosimo and his courtiers had left, they arrived once again in Florence.\(^\text{16}\)

Cosimo loved to travel. In his early twenties he had made several trips to northern Italy and already in 1667-68 he had embarked for a first visit to the Dutch Republic, the Southern Low Countries and Northern Germany.\(^\text{17}\) Apparently, Cosimo

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was so fascinated by what he had seen in the United Provinces on his first voyage that already within a few months after his return to Tuscany, he left for his Grand Tour through Europe. In contrast to what historians have argued until a few decades ago, these travels cannot be considered any longer as attempts by Cosimo to escape his unhappy marriage with Marguerite Louise d’Orléans (1645-1721), a cousin of Louis XIV. Rather, the prince travelled to learn how to become a ruler.\(^\text{18}\) In doing so Cosimo conformed to a recent Medici tradition. Four decades earlier, at the outset of his personal rule, Cosimo’s father Ferdinand II (1610-1670) had visited amongst other places the imperial court at Vienna and Prague. Three decades later, in 1698, Cosimo’s son Gian Gastone (1671-1737) on his turn went from Reichstadt in Bohemia, where he resided with his recently wed spouse, Anna Maria from Saxe-Lauenburg (1672-1741) to Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam.\(^\text{19}\)

Nevertheless Cosimo’s travels differed in one important aspect from those of his father or his son. Whereas the latter basically limited themselves to shorter or longer stays at the courts of friendly dynasties, where they learned how to behave in such courtly environments, Cosimo also wandered around.\(^\text{20}\) This prince thus did not only strengthen the ties with the monarchs of Spain, Portugal, England and France, he also got to know their realms.

A similar pattern occurred in the Dutch Republic. Taking his two trips to the country together, Cosimo spent thirty six days in the economic and cultural metropolis Amsterdam (42 % of his total time in the Republic) and fifteen days (or 17 %) in the political capital The Hague. In the latter town the prince met several members of the Orange-Nassau family and he talked to various foreign ambassadors. On 7 February 1668, the young William of Orange (1650-1702), the future king-stadholder, even impressed his peer Cosimo of his talents as a dancing and thus virile prince during a ballet performance staged to celebrate the Peace of Breda.\(^\text{21}\) But Cosimo did not only spend time in government and diplomatic circles as he also extensively toured the United Provinces. From Alkmaar in the North, to Dordrecht in the South, he stopped in nearly all the important towns in Holland. From the traditional six towns which had dominated the county in the Middle Ages, decaying Gouda was the only one that did not receive a princely visit. In contrast, Cosimo went twice to booming Rotterdam, where he spent four days in total.\(^\text{22}\) Moreover, during his first Dutch journey the princely party hopped as well for a short visit to Zeeland. In contrast, land towns in the provinces of Guelders and Utrecht only served as stopovers on Cosimo’s travels back and forth to the maritime Western part of the country. Cosimo mainly concentrated on Holland, the powerhouse of the country.

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Short excursions to Zeeland and Friesland completed his impressions on an essentially maritime Republic. This travel pattern is visualized in the table underneath.

**Table I. Travel pattern of prince Cosimo and his train in the Dutch Republic. December 1667-February 1668 and June-July 1669.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>State Brabant (Generality Land)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guelders</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holland</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>80.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friesland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overijssel</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utrecht</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zeeland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>86</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
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Cosimo insisted on travelling as a private person. Nevertheless everywhere he met various dignitaries. This formula implied that Cosimo’s princely status was recognized by his hosts, while enabling him to choose his own travel destinations. It conferred a personal touch to his journeys, which should not be considered as diplomatic missions, but rather as private princely experiences. His excursion to Friesland is a good example of that practice. The directors of the admiralty of Northern Holland provided their yacht to ferry the Tuscan party to the east bank of the Zuiderzee. It is hard to imagine that they would have conferred a similar honour to visitors of lesser rank. But once he had arrived in Friesland, the prince toured Stavoren and Molkwerum as a simple tourist. In this sense, Cosimo was a trendsetter. Later onwards in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a long incognito journey became a fashionable element of princely education projects. The best known example is that of Czar Peter the Great’s (1672-1725) first trip to the Dutch Republic in 1697-1698.

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23 Cosimo’s itineraries in the Low Countries are reconstructed in Wagenaar & Eringa (eds.), *Een Toscaanse prins*, cit., pp. 32-33 and pp. 160-161. Already in February 1668 when Cosimo toured the Republic for the first time, he had wished to visit Friesland on his way from Holland to Hamburg. However, winter storms and floods forced the prince to travel over land via Westphalia. Cf. Hoogewerff (ed.), *De twee reizen van Cosimo de’ Medici*, cit., pp. 140-142.

24 This table is based on the itineria provided by Wagenaar & Eringa (eds.), *Een Toscaanse prins*, cit., p. 32 and 162. Calculations are made on the basis of the number of nights the party spent in a certain place.

25 In the United Provinces five regional admiralties paid for and commanded each a navy escadre of the Dutch fleet. The one of Northern Holland was based in the ports of Hoorn and Enkhuizen. Cf. O. van Nimwegen & R. Prud’homme van Reine, ‘*De organisatie en financiering van leger en vloot van de Republiek*’, in: P. Groen e.a. (eds.), *De Tachtigjarige Oorlog. Van opstand naar geregelde oorlog. 1568-1648* (Militaire geschiedenis van Nederland. 1), Amsterdam, Boom, pp. 377-378. Cosimo had a great interest in naval matters. For instance, in February 1668 he had visited the central navy basis at Hellevoetsluis, where also the *Royal Charles*, the main price that the Dutch fleet had won at the Battle of the Medway in June 1667, was anchored. Also in Amsterdam he visited the admiralty headquarters twice. Cf. Hoogewerff (ed.), *De twee reizen van Cosimo de’ Medici*, cit., pp. 141-142 and 189.

In order to keep memories alive of what the prince had seen on his journeys, some of his courtiers wrote a diary. Subsequently their texts were edited by Cosimo’s chamberlain marquis Filippo Corsini (1647-1706). The final copy was bound in beautiful parchment covers and stored in the Medici library. One of the sources of that official account was a text that has been labelled by Godfried Hoogewerff (1884-1963) as Corsini’s private journal. However, most likely the main author of the official account was the learned Lorenzo Magalotti (1637-1712) who had already visited the United Provinces on an earlier occasion. During that first visit Magalotti had made several friends who were connected to the Republic of Letters, such as the scholars Nicolaas Heinsius (1620-1681), Isaac Vossius (1618-1689) and Jacobus Gronovius (1645-1716). Probably these three men supplied him with the historical, institutional and topographical details that abound in the text. Pier Maria Baldi (c. 1630-1686) provided eighteen large pen and ink drawings on additional sheets of the most noticeable Dutch sites as a visual addendum to the text. Sights of both Stavoren (1996), 344-349 and L. Toorians, ‘An eager apprentice. Peter the Great and the Dutch Republic’, in: The Low Countries, 4 (1996), pp. 275-276.


Fig. 1 map and view of Stavoren in the mid seventeenth century. Etching by Jacob van Meurs (1619/20-1680). © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
and Molkwerum figure amongst them. A more informal diary of Cosimo’s second Dutch trip that has survived, is the one kept by his court physician Giovanbattista Gornia (1633-1684). Often this trained scientist and rather practical man rendered his impressions in a few keywords and with an emphasis on physical details. The difference between these various authors becomes clear when we compare their descriptions of Cosimo’s visits to Stavoren (Fig. 1) and Molkwerum (Fig. 2).

![Fig. 2 map of Molkwerum in 1718. The caption emphasizes that this ‘notorious village’ was known as ‘the Frisian maze’. Engraving by Johannes Hilarides.](attachment:image)

‘L’antica lingua e i costumi degli antichi Frisoni’
Giovanbattista Gornia seems to have been disappointed by what he had seen in Stavoren. In his eyes only the skulls and claws of bears that decorated the town gates and the remarkably small size of the port were deemed noteworthy. Such vivid

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35 ‘Si sbarcò a Steveren, porto piccolissimo e fatto con palificate ... Et alle porte di Staveren vi sono i teschi e artigli d’ orsi incisi per trofeo’. Hoogewerff, De twee reizen, cit., pp. 314-315.
details lack in Lorenzo Magalotti’s official travel account. Nevertheless, this author also emphasized that the heydays of Stavoren were over. Although the ramparts and bulwarks were in good condition, the town had lost its previous splendour and had become quite small. However, once Stavoren had been the capital of the Frisians, where their kings resided and ships coming from all northern seas anchored. But floods had destroyed the palaces and churches, whereas the new port had been silted.36 Magalotti, who just as Cosimo had a keen interest in religion,37 concluded his description with some brief historical notes on the struggles between the Frankish and the Frisian kings and on the chapters of canons and cloisters that had existed in the town and in its neighbourhood until they had been swept away by the Reformation.

Although no physical remnants of its heydays had been preserved, the Tuscan visitors valued Stavoren for its antiquity. However, various opinions circulated about its precise age. According to Corsini’s private diary, the first king of the Frisians had established himself there about 300 BC. In the official account of the journey Lorenzo Magalotti was more cautious. He thought that Stavoren had been founded one year after the birth of Christ.38 These different opinions reflected the uncertainty that reigned amongst humanists about the origins of the Frisians. According to the early sixteenth-century chronicler Worp of Thabor (-1538), the Frisians originally came from Asia, but he proposed three different possible arrival dates. A generation later Suffridus Petrus (1527-1597) acknowledged that five different opinions circulated on this matter. Personally Suffridus preferred to date the Frisian history back as far as possible, in order to enhance the status of Friesland within the young Republic. In any case according to him Frisians could boast an older history than the Hollanders.39 However, Nijmegen, where the Tuscan party passed on its way from Amsterdam to Spa, had even stronger claims on a respectable antiquity. Lorenzo Magalotti reported that locals supposed their town had been founded by the troops of Julius Caesar, and Filippo Corsini thought the legacy of the Romans was still present in that town.40 At Molkwerum, the Tuscans encountered similar difficulties to interpret what they saw. In the middle of the seventeenth century this large village must have counted about 1,500 inhabitants. Most of them did not belong to the privileged Reformed Church. The largest religious community in the village was those of the relatively isolated Anabaptists.41

36 ‘La città di Staveren è la più antica di tutte le città della Frisia, giacché fu fabbricata, secondo alcuni autori, un’anno dopo la nascita di Cristo [...] ma avendo le inondazioni del mare sommersa la maggior parte di questa medesima città fu rifabbricata in altro luogo più sicuro. [...] Era anticamente Staveren una città potentissima, ricca, molto popolata, ed il porto di mare più famoso di tutte le coste settentrionali, ma le frequenti inondazioni l’hanno talmente sminuita, che in paragone di quello che era viene stimata poco, benchè ne resti delle sue rovine ancora a bastanza per formarne una buona città. Vi sono grosse muraglie e gran bastioni circondati da paludi. Vi sì vedono molte belle strade, e vi è ancora un gran molo avanzato nel mare, sostenuto da puntelli per impedire che le arene non turbino l’entrata di questo porto. Gli antichi re di Frisia abitavano in questa città’. G.J. Hoogewerff, De twee reizen, cit., p. 268.
islands. Narrow, stinking canals connected the different parts of the settlement with each other. Therefore the village resembled a maze (Fig. 1). The tall and bearded male inhabitants somehow looked like Germans. The women dressed strangely; according to Gianbattista Gornia, they wore strange bonnets with large (metal?) ties on top of their heads. Moreover, they wore two pairs of stockings: large ones that reached their ankles, and above those small socks that just covered their feet. Both sexes behaved rudely and their language was not understood by outsiders.  

Reading these descriptions it seemed as if Cosimo and his courtiers had ventured in some exotic destination, where barbarians lived. The minds of these cultivated Italians had been influenced by their reading of Tacitus’ *De origine et situ Germanorum*, a classic of each serious humanist training since its rediscovery in the mid fifteenth century by Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1405-1464).  

More in particular, the idea as if Molkwerum, together with the nearby town of Hindeloopen, was a place where somehow the customs and the language of the old Frisians would have been preserved, may date back to the late sixteenth or the early seventeenth century. However, in the mid-1640s this myth became fashionable in learned circles. In those years, both Janus Vliitius (1620-1666) and Franciscus Junius (c. 1590-1677) wandered around in Friesland, noticing the folklore costumes and studying the local language. They were attracted by the fame of the poet Gysbert Japix (1603-1666), who had conferred once again literary status on Frisian, after the virtual disappearance of the written variant of the language since the 1580s. Independently of each other Vliitius and Junius tried to establish the affinity between the various Germanic languages. Vliitius and Junius belonged to the same intellectual circle as Gronovius, Heinsius and Vossius. One may suppose that Johan de Witt picked up his suggestion for Cosimo to visit that part of Friesland from these men. Obviously prince Cosimo and his company did not understand Frisian. However, in line with the fashionable ideas of his learned friends, Lorenzo Magalotti must have have
been one of the first foreign visitors to assert that in Molkwerum a particular variant of that language was spoken. Nearly simultaneously another acquaintance of Johan de Witt, the English ambassador sir William Temple (1628-1699), remarked in his Observations upon the United Provinces that:

the Friezons old Language (has) still so great affinity with our Old English, as to appear easily to have been the same; most of their words still retaining the same signification and sound; very different from the Language of the Hollanders. This is most remarkable in a little Town called Malcuera, upon the Zudder Sea.

Subsequently nearly all early modern English travellers who visited Friesland described Molkwerum as a labyrinth. Nevertheless, they recognized its inhabitants as ‘distant cousins’. For prince Cosimo and his courtiers in contrast, Friesland remained a strange and somewhat primitive region.

Conclusion
Cosimo de’ Medici greatly admired the Dutch Republic. Within two years he and his courtiers twice toured the United Provinces. Although, they spent most of the time in Amsterdam and The Hague, the economic and the political capital of the country, the Tuscans made as well a brief excursion to the somewhat more peripheral region of Friesland, where they visited Stavoren and Molkwerum. However, these places did not meet up to their expectations. In the Middle Ages Stavoren had been an important economic, political and religious centre. But from the twelfth century onwards the town had been regularly flooded. Subsequently, due to political turmoil it had been burned down at several occasions in the fifteenth century. By then, the port had been silted up. Although, some prosperity returned in the seventeenth century, the town never returned to its former glory. In contrast, Molkwerum reached its demographic heyday only in the middle of the seventeenth century, more or less at the moment Cosimo and his courtiers visited the village. In subsequent decades, that place was hit by a severe crisis as well. However, the village lacked the political and economic privileges of a chartered town.

Geographical isolation, religious peculiarities and remaining antiquities may have turned Molkwerum and Stavoren into attractive travel destinations for learned Dutchmen, but Cosimo and his fellow Tuscans were hardly interested in such frivolities. They had come to the Republic to discover thriving cities, with their wealth of recently constructed palaces.


52 Trompetter, Eén grote familie, cit., pp. 193-194.
and warehouses.\textsuperscript{53} In Holland, they found these things. In Friesland on the contrary, they were introduced to strange customs, an incomprehensible language and a legendary past, without physical remnants that could make it trustworthy.

\textbf{Keywords}

Cosimo De’ Medici, Friesland, early modern travelling, regional identities

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\textbf{RIASSUNTO}

Una compagnia di viaggio toscana tra i frisi
La gita di Cosimo a Stavoren e Molkwerum (26 giugno 1669)

Quest’articolo esamina la percezione della Frisia attestata in alcuni resoconti dell’escursione a Stavoren e Molkwerum compiuta nel 1669 da Cosimo de’ Medici. Il principe toscano visitò la Repubblica delle Province Unite negli anni 1667-1768 e 1669 per studiare le strutture politiche ed economiche di un paese che in alcuni decenni era diventato una grande potenza. Benché la comitiva principesca fosse prevalentemente interessata a vedere le grandi città olandesi, il suo ospite Johan de Witt le aveva consigliato di visitare anche la Frisia, regione piuttosto isolata e reputata per aver conservato gli antichi usi e costumi. Il 26 giugno 1669 la comitiva compì un’escursione al sudovest della Frisia. Sebbene la cittadina portuale di Stavoren fosse nota come la capitale degli antichi Frisoni e gli intellettuali olandesi apprezzassero Molkwerum per l’urbanistica labirintica, la religione anabattistica e l’uso della lingua antica, i viaggiatori toscani sembrano essere stati colpiti più dal declino e dalla stranezza della zona che dal suo fascino culturale e storico. Dai resoconti di viaggio non pare che la comitiva, venuta nei Paesi Bassi per scoprire novità, abbia valutato positivamente il contrasto della primitiva Frisia con l’Olanda moderna. Questo studio illustra pertanto come i toscani non adottavano automaticamente l’immagine della Frisia propagata dagli olandesi, ma esprimevano invece una percezione diversa, motivata da obiettivi di viaggio non necessariamente storico-culturali.

\textsuperscript{53} van Veen, ‘Cosimo de’ Medici’s reis’, cit., p. 47.